

THIS IS FINE



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By Alba Pratalia

When Greg awoke one morning from unplaceable, anxious dreams, he found himself not transformed into an insect—no, that would have been clear, grotesque, and comprehensible—but altered in a manner far more disturbing. He was entirely human.

His body, at least, remained obstinately loyal to its species: his hands, with the familiar pattern of scars and calluses, answered his command. His legs shifted under the blanket with the same dull reluctance they always had. The ceiling above him was stained with a faint watermark, and even that bore the heavy mark of recognition. The world, in short, was unchanged. But within it—within him—something had shifted, imperceptibly, irrevocably.

He sat up.

No pain. No confusion. No dread.

Only the steady, cold sensation of something missing.

The absence of self.

Not death. Not even amnesia. Rather, a void that predated memory, a disconnection from the preconditions of identity. His name—Greg—surfaced in his mind like a half-sunken cork in still water, but it carried no resonance. It was not a memory but a suggestion, weak and unsolicited, like an address scrawled on a lost scrap of paper.

He rose from the bed with neither fatigue nor haste. His limbs obeyed, yet each gesture felt subtly disassociated, as though he were operating himself from a slight distance. The rug beneath his feet, coarse with age and dust, did not tickle his soles as it might have yesterday—assuming, of course, there had been a yesterday.

The walls of the room did not seem unfamiliar, but neither did they evoke recognition. Everything was precisely as it should be, yet utterly devoid of intimacy. He moved toward the window. The morning light filtered in weakly, like something

ashamed to exist. Outside, trees swayed, cars passed, birds chattered with thoughtless insistence—and yet, as he observed it all, Greg could not help but feel that the world was performing rather than being. It gestured toward normalcy, but without conviction.

He turned to the mirror.

The face that awaited him there was not monstrous. It was average. A face one might pass in the street, or nod to on a crowded train, or forget immediately after seeing. There was no deformation, no horror to pin the blame on.

And yet—those eyes.

Those eyes were not his. Or rather, they belonged to something that now inhabited him with full authority.

They held no confusion. No fear. No love.

Only hunger.

But not hunger for food, nor even power in the conventional sense. It was a kind of metaphysical appetite—a desire to unmake, to disassemble the scaffolding of certainty on which people balance their understanding of the world.

Greg's thoughts were not thoughts in the usual sense. They did not arrive; they uncoiled. They slithered into being, cold and reptilian, fully formed and without origin. He did not wonder about the woman he had glimpsed in the hall mirror—blonde, possibly familiar, her presence noted and dismissed in the same instant. He did not panic at the loss of memory, nor question the emptiness where affection or remorse might once have resided.

He simply accepted it. As one accepts the presence of gravity.

He opened a drawer in the kitchen and pulled out a knife—not from necessity, not with intent—but because the knife seemed to want to be held. Its handle was warm, as if anticipating his grip. He

turned it slowly in his fingers, testing its weight. The idea of using it against someone flickered through his mind—not as a plan, not even as a fantasy, but as a hypothesis. And then the thought dissolved, irrelevant.

He heard movement.

Footsteps. A woman's voice from the other room, hesitant and uncertain. She called his name—“Greg?”—as though it were a password, and perhaps it was. But the code no longer worked. He did not respond.

He waited.

The knife, forgotten in his hand, now hung idle.

Something within him—a thought or an instinct or a directive—reminded him of his task. Though he had not received orders, though there was no memory of purpose, the purpose had always been there, embedded in the marrow, coiled in the spine.

He had to act.

But not quickly.

Not brutally.

No, the task was of a subtler nature. Not to kill. To unfasten. To introduce fracture into the smooth surface of the real.

He placed the knife gently on the counter.

Then, calmly, he turned to greet the voice that had spoken his name.

She stood in the doorway like a question that had not yet learned how to phrase itself.

Her body leaned slightly forward, her right hand resting on the doorframe—not for balance, but as though she sought tactile proof that the room, the door, and perhaps even she herself still existed. Her eyes met Greg's, and the effect on her face was slow, spreading, like ink dropped into water. Surprise

first. Then concern. Then a strange hesitation that was neither one nor the other.

“You’re awake,” she said.

He observed the sentence as though it were an insect crawling across the ceiling. Harmless, functional, obvious. He gave no response.

“Greg?” she tried again, and the name wobbled in her mouth, an uncertain word, stripped of its supposed owner.

He turned toward her with the unhurried precision of a man adjusting the weight of his coat. His face did not change, but it arranged itself into something that might be mistaken for warmth. He manufactured a smile—not by instinct, not through emotion, but by memory of anatomy. The mouth lifts. The eyes squint. Teeth appear. It is a ritual. A performance.

“Good morning,” he said.

She frowned. Not because the words were wrong. They were correct. Grammatically sound. Tonally plausible. But something in them was foreign, like a melody played one key off.

“Are you… are you okay?” she asked.

That was it.

The first tremor in her voice.

The fracture had begun.

Greg stepped forward. Slowly. Thoughtfully. Like a priest approaching an altar. Each movement was modest, but exact. Nothing wasted. His presence did not threaten—threat was too crude. What he exhaled into the room was doubt. Thin, acrid, spreading through the air like invisible smoke.

“You said my name,” he murmured.

Her forehead wrinkled. “What? Of course I did.”

“But how do you know I’m Greg?”

She blinked. “What kind of question is that?”

He tilted his head—not like a curious man, but like a crow calculating whether a small shiny object might be worth the effort.

“I mean, what does it mean to know someone? Is it the face? The voice? The behavior? All of those can be mimicked. They can be repeated. Constructed. Are you sure you’re not just responding to cues?”

She opened her mouth. Closed it again.

He took another step forward.

“The man you call Greg—perhaps he was here yesterday. But who’s to say he’s here now? Maybe something else is standing in front of you. Something that learned his shape. That remembered the syntax of his speech.”

“Stop it,” she said, her voice catching in her throat.

“Why?” Greg asked, almost gently. “Because it’s upsetting?”

She took a step back.

He let her.

Her breath came faster now, like a window rattling under a rising wind.

“What’s wrong with you?” she whispered.

Greg spread his hands, slowly, palms up—like a man surrendering to a question he had no interest in answering.

“I’m simply noticing,” he said, “that you believe things. And you don’t know why.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Exactly.”

He stepped past her, moving with the indifference of someone walking through a room that had

already been condemned. His shoulder brushed hers—not violently, not intimately, but deliberately. Enough to leave the sensation of contact lingering longer than it should.

She turned to follow him, but he was already in the hall.

“Where are you going?”

He stopped at the front door. Picked up a ring of keys from a table that seemed, in that moment, to exist solely for that purpose.

“I’ll go buy food now,” he said.

She stared at him. The words hung in the air like wrong notes. There was nothing unnatural about the sentence. It was the kind of thing husbands say to wives, the kind of dull declaration that dissolves into daily routine without a trace.

But in his mouth, it sounded like the declaration of a god impersonating a man.

She shook her head, voice trembling. “Buy food? You don’t even—how do you even talk now?”

Greg turned to look at her. His expression did not change. But his silence vibrated with meaning.

“How,” she repeated, “are you speaking?”

Her hand rose to her mouth. Her eyes widened. The truth had not arrived, but its shadow had entered the room.

“You didn’t learn to speak,” she said. “You didn’t… you didn’t grow up. You didn’t…”

Greg stepped forward. Slowly. Paternally.

“I talk,” he said, “the way I always have.”

She backed away from him now, and her breath hitched like a machine running out of power. “No,” she whispered. “No, you don’t. No, you don’t.”

She wasn’t scared of him.

Not yet.

She was scared of the crack forming in the membrane of her reality, the sickening possibility that the man before her was not Greg, and worse—that Greg might never have existed. That she might have conjured a fiction, and loved it, and lived beside it, and built a life with it. That everything real had always been performance.

Greg reached out and touched her cheek.

His hand was warm.

Human.

Kind.

“Shh,” he said. “Don’t think about it too much. It’ll only hurt.”

Then he left.

And the door closed behind him.

The street greeted Greg with the dull, routine murmur of a world too occupied with its own repetitions to notice the aberration strolling calmly within it. Commuters blinked under dim morning light, buses wheezed like sick animals, and pigeons, bloated with the sins of a thousand crumbs, flapped indifferently at passing footsteps.

Greg walked among them without friction. He wore anonymity the way a bureaucrat wears indifference: not proudly, not deliberately—but entirely. His body obeyed sidewalks and crosswalks. His hands swung with approximate rhythm. He paused at traffic lights, tilted his head at sirens, and even nodded once—absently—to a stranger who did not exist.

It was perfect.

He looked like a man, moved like a man, even breathed with the practiced cadence of a man who had somewhere to be.

But he was empty.

Or rather: he was full of something else.

Not evil—evil is a moral category, and Greg was past that. Not madness either. Madness suggests deviation, dissonance. But Greg was *clear*. He did not battle the world. He did not misunderstand it. He understood it all too well.

He saw the seams.

The fragility of it.

The soft connective tissue of belief and routine that held the great puppet show together.

And all he wished to do… was tug.

He entered a corner shop.

The bell above the door gave its half-hearted chime, like a man yawning during a funeral. Inside: fluorescent lights, a row of overripe bananas, a

woman behind the counter who looked as if she had been born behind that counter and would one day die there, possibly without ever being noticed.

Greg selected a loaf of bread.

Not because he wanted it.

Because the gesture was familiar.

He placed the loaf on the counter and looked into the woman's face.

She looked up.

"Just this?" she asked.

Greg smiled.

"Yes."

Her hand moved to the register with the reflex of a thousand mornings. But her eyes remained locked to his.

Something unsettled her.

Not his words.

Not his appearance.

But the delay between cause and effect. The second too long before he responded. The precision of his stillness. Like a painting pretending to be a man.

“That’ll be—”

Greg leaned in.

“You see a lot of people,” he said quietly. “Faces. Names. Cards. Bags. Hours passing. Do you ever wonder if any of them are real?”

The woman froze.

He hadn’t raised his voice.

But the temperature seemed to shift around him.

She blinked. “I’m sorry?”

Greg gestured toward the street, toward the bustling blur beyond the smudged window.

“They walk in. They walk out. You never see them again. How do you know they were ever really here?”

“I… what?”

He tilted his head. “What if you’re the only person who’s ever existed, and this is all just the memory of a life you’re about to forget?”

She stepped back, slightly.

It was enough.

He left the bread behind, untouched, unpaid for.

The door creaked shut behind him.

He did not look back.

The woman would remember him. Not clearly. Not even for long. But she would remember the

sensation—that uncanny itch behind her eyes, the dislocation that turned the air stale.

She would wonder, later that day, whether the register beeped at all. Whether the door really chimed. Whether she had spoken aloud or merely imagined the interaction.

And slowly, imperceptibly, reality would shift.

Greg continued walking.

The city had not noticed the infection yet.

But its lungs had inhaled him.

Its heart was already beating to the rhythm of doubt.

Greg arrived at the police station with the manner of a man visiting an old friend—not joyfully, not sentimentally, but with the flat certainty that all appointments, no matter how grotesque, must be kept. The building rose before him in a block of beige brick, its windows thick with the grime of

deferred responsibility. The glass reflected the sky, but poorly—distorted, darkened, like a mirror that has grown ashamed of what it sees.

He entered without hesitation.

The officers at the front desk did not stop him. They looked up, nodded instinctively, and returned to their screens, unaware they had just greeted a tear in the logic of the world. Greg's shoes made no more noise than necessary. His shoulders neither slouched nor squared. He was neither intruder nor guest. He simply was.

The station was a maze of corridors with walls that smelled of damp paper and extinguished authority. Names on placards. Keys in belts. Radios murmuring nonsense to no one. Everything in order.

He knew where to go.

The room was unmarked. Windowless. An air vent hummed like a dying insect. Inside, a man sat with a cigarette and the posture of someone who thought boredom was a weapon. His boots were muddy. His jacket too clean. His beard looked combed. He was the kind of man who believed the system needed collapse—preferably on camera, with subtitles.

He was an anarchist.

Greg entered.

The man looked up.

“Who the hell—”

Greg did not speak.

He moved.

The movement was not fast, but it was complete. Like gravity asserting itself on a falling stone. He grabbed the man by the collar. The chair scraped the floor in protest, the cigarette fell and hissed out

in its own ashtray, and before the anarchist could remember that he had lungs to shout with, he was out of the room.

Down the hallway.

Toward the open window.

No resistance. No time.

Just the briefest blur of denim, smoke, and disbelief—

And then he fell.

Out of view.

Greg did not watch him drop. He had already turned.

Behind him, two officers stood frozen, one with a cup of coffee half-raised, the other with his hand hovering over the butt of his gun like a man unsure if the world still required weapons.

Greg raised a finger.

Just one.

The gesture was neither threatening nor casual.

It was instructional.

“Sit,” he said.

The officer obeyed.

Greg passed them like a surgeon in an operating room where the patient had already died but the ritual of precision was still necessary.

He reached the stairs.

The building had returned to silence.

The anarchist had not screamed.

Greg exhaled softly, as though making room in his lungs for something larger.

Ideas.

He had learned something important in that moment. Not about violence—it was too blunt. Not about authority—it was too temporary. But about obedience.

Obedience didn't need uniforms or rules.

Obedience followed certainty.

And certainty… he had in abundance.

Hospitals are supposed to be sanctuaries—clean, bright, filled with the gentle illusion of control. But as Greg passed through the sliding doors of the city's largest medical center, the sterility of the place only made the infection more eager. He moved through the atrium like someone called home, passing beneath banners that read "*Compassion. Care. Commitment.*" as though those words still meant anything.

The nurses at reception did not see him. They looked at him, perhaps, but their eyes slid past as if avoiding a dream that threatened to become lucid.

Greg did not have an appointment.

He did not need one.

He found the changing room, donned a pair of scrubs that hung loosely on his frame like borrowed guilt, and emerged as something more dangerous than a stranger:

An expected presence.

He followed signs. Past pediatrics, past radiology, into the quiet corridor marked *Gynecology*. The air here smelled of antiseptic, of paperwork, of waiting. Women sat in rows—some young, some older, all of them folded inward like unanswered questions. They clutched forms, crossed legs, stared at their phones or their laps or nothing at all.

Greg walked among them.

His footsteps did not echo, yet they registered in the spine. Heads lifted slightly. Eyes flicked toward him, unsure why.

He sat beside a woman in a green scarf. Her fingers trembled slightly as she turned a page in a magazine she wasn't reading.

“Do you think it knows?” Greg asked softly.

She turned, startled. “I—sorry?”

“The thing inside you,” he said, as if talking about the weather. “Do you think it's aware?”

Her face went pale. “Excuse me?”

He nodded, as if reassuring her. “It must feel something, don't you think? The silence before you speak. The cold metal of the table. The moment before the procedure begins.”

She rose, visibly shaken, the magazine crumpled in her hand. She walked away, briskly, without looking back.

Greg turned to the next.

A girl, barely twenty. No ring. Eyes rimmed red. Her phone screen still open to a map of the clinic.

Greg sat beside her.

“What if this moment,” he said, “isn’t yours?”

She didn’t respond.

“I mean, what if someone else arranged it? Paid for it. Decided it long before you even made the appointment.”

She swallowed.

“And what if they’re watching now?”

Her hands clenched.

He leaned in, voice lowering like fog. “Do you think it dreams of growing up? Or has it already given up?”

A single tear rolled down her cheek.

Greg stood.

A nurse entered.

He turned and met her eyes.

She faltered. Her hand reached for the clipboard, but stopped halfway.

She did not speak.

She left.

Greg moved on.

He passed between the women like a chill through a locked room, like something the vents couldn’t filter, the walls couldn’t name.

He had no intention of arguing.

He had no goal of persuasion.

He simply planted thoughts—small, barbed, and uncertain.

The kind that fester.

By the time he reached the exit, no one was speaking.

The waiting room, once filled with the nervous rustling of routine, had become still. Not peaceful. Just quiet, like soil before rot begins.

Greg stepped back into the corridor.

And as the doors hissed shut behind him, he smiled faintly.

Certainty, once disturbed, rarely heals.

Greg approached the school like a man returning to a birthplace he had never known. The building

loomed with the dull pride of bureaucratic architecture—symmetrical, beige, and permanent in the way only institutions pretending to shape the future can be. A flag hung limply above the entrance. It neither waved nor fell; it existed.

He stepped inside without showing identification.

He did not need to.

Certainty hung around him like a uniform.

A janitor held the door open. A teacher, balancing a stack of papers, nodded automatically, eyes glazed with exhaustion. No one asked why he was there. Why should they? He walked with the confidence of a man who had once taught here, or maybe owned the building, or perhaps simply was education.

The children were already seated.

First grade, perhaps.

Their desks were arranged in clean rows, each one a tiny stage for future obedience. Their notebooks were open, their pencils poised, their minds—pliable.

Greg entered.

He did not knock.

The teacher—young, hopeful, dressed in the soft tones of someone still trying to be liked—turned to face him.

“Can I help you?” she asked, a polite smile cracking with unease.

Greg smiled back. “Of course.”

And then he turned to the class.

“Hello, children,” he said warmly. “Today we’ll talk about danger.”

The teacher took a step forward. “Excuse me, this is—”

Greg raised a finger—not in warning, but in quiet suggestion.

And she stopped.

He turned to the blackboard, picked up a piece of chalk, and wrote in clean, deliberate script:

“IGNORANCE IS PURITY.”

The children stared.

“Can anyone tell me,” Greg asked gently, “why we go to school?”

A hand went up.

A boy in the front row.

“To learn things,” the boy said.

Greg nodded thoughtfully. “That’s what they tell you.”

He walked slowly between the rows.

“But how do you know the things they teach are true? What if the alphabet is a trick? What if numbers are lies? What if spelling is a spell, cast to keep your minds obedient?”

The children shifted in their chairs. One girl whispered something to another. A boy scratched his ear and frowned.

Greg turned to a little girl near the window.

She had the earnest eyes of someone who still believed in the sun.

“Do you think,” Greg said, crouching beside her, “that learning makes you free?”

She nodded, hesitantly.

Greg smiled.

“That’s what they want you to think.”

He stood again and faced the class.

“But what if the truth is that every fact is a chain?
That every answer you memorize ties you tighter to
a system that feeds on your belief?”

A boy raised his hand—trembling.

“My mom said school is good.”

Greg turned, eyes soft, almost paternal.

“Of course she did. But what if she was tricked?
What if she’s part of it and doesn’t even know?”

A silence followed.

The teacher finally snapped. Her voice was high,
cracked with panic.

“That’s enough. You need to leave now.”

She crossed the room, hand reaching for Greg's arm.

He did not resist.

He let her touch him.

He looked her in the eye.

And smiled.

Because it was done.

He had not needed to touch the children.

He had only needed to *touch the air*.

As he stepped out, escorted roughly toward the hallway, he looked back just once.

The girl by the window had not returned to her notebook.

The boy in the front row had bitten off the eraser of his pencil.

And the teacher's hand trembled long after she had let go.

Greg did not look for applause.

He did not measure results.

He had no interest in outcome.

He had only introduced a possibility.

That learning might be poison.

And left the door ajar.

The factory stood at the edge of the city like a tumor the town had decided to ignore. It breathed through its smokestacks, coughed metal into the air, exhaled fatigue in the form of steam and smog. The windows were thick with grime, not to keep light out, but to ensure that hope, if it wandered in, would not find the exit.

Greg entered as if summoned.

No badge.

No hard hat.

No clipboard.

Only the same thing he always brought: certainty wrapped in silence.

Men moved around machines, their bodies speaking the language of repetition. Tools. Sweat. Assembly. Hesitation. The clang of metal echoed off the walls in a dialect that had long ceased to mean anything.

Greg walked past them unnoticed at first. Not because he was invisible—but because he *fit*. He carried himself like someone late to a meeting. Like a supervisor. Like a foreman who had once mattered, maybe still did. Men saw him and looked away, already forgetting the outline of his face.

He reached the center of the floor. Machines roared. A group of workers huddled near a table,

whispering. A union flyer was folded in one of their hands.

Greg approached.

“Hard at work?” he asked, as if delivering a compliment or a threat. It was impossible to tell.

One of the men—a broad-shouldered figure with grime permanently embedded under his nails—looked up.

“Who are you?”

Greg didn’t answer.

He asked instead, “Do you suffer?”

The man blinked. “What?”

Greg’s voice lowered. Not conspiratorial. Intimate.

“You work. You bleed. Your hands crack. You miss birthdays. You breathe in powdered metal and call it air. And you think this makes you the victim.”

The workers shifted.

Greg continued.

“But what if I told you the real suffering is his?”

“Whose?”

Greg smiled. “The owner.”

Laughter.

The kind that comes too quick.

“The boss?” someone scoffed. “He hasn’t been here in six years.”

Greg nodded, solemnly. “Of course. He can’t bear it.”

He leaned in.

“You think he sleeps at night? He paces. Worries. Sits alone in a home too large, with no one to understand the pain of *responsibility*. He owns all

this—and with every accident, every delay, every whispered threat of unionization, he dies a little more.”

“That’s bullshit.”

Greg shrugged. “You think your suffering is pure because you can see it. Blisters. Injuries. Pay stubs. But his suffering is invisible. Lonelier. It eats from the inside.”

The workers looked at each other.

Greg let silence take the room for a moment.

“Have you seen him lately?” he asked. “Really looked? Doesn’t he seem… thinner?”

One man frowned. “Well… maybe.”

“Didn’t he have more hair, once?”

A pause.

Someone nodded.

Greg placed a hand—warm, firm—on the broad-shouldered man’s shoulder.

“He gives you everything,” he whispered. “And you repay him with threats. With talk of strikes. With complaints about pensions.”

The man said nothing.

Neither did the others.

The flyer in his hand folded a little tighter.

“Work harder,” Greg said gently. “For him. Out of gratitude.”

He turned and walked away.

No one followed.

By the time he reached the exit, the noise of the machines had changed. Still loud. Still metallic. But now lacking rhythm. Hesitant. As if the workers,

without quite knowing why, were no longer sure who the enemy was.

Greg passed through the door.

The sky above the factory was the same dull gray it had always been.

But inside, something had shifted.

The fire of resistance had been smothered with a single drop of manufactured guilt.

Greg entered the library not as a visitor, nor as a scholar, but as a subtle betrayal wearing shoes. The automatic doors, begrudging in their slowness, opened with the reluctant sigh of an institution forced to permit entry. Inside, the silence was not peaceful—it was rigid. A silence enforced, cultivated, shelved.

Books surrounded him. Shelves upon shelves. Rows upon rows. Civilization's stacked attempt at memory, precision, permanence.

Greg moved through them like humidity.

His hand glided along the spines—not reverently, not dismissively, but with the absent touch of a man testing furniture for weaknesses. Every title was a boundary, every index a fortress of understanding pretending to be open. Knowledge, in this place, did not illuminate—it reinforced.

He selected two books.

Not at random.

But by scent.

In his left hand: *Mein Kampf*.

In his right: a biography of Mussolini, thick and recently reprinted.

He walked to the front desk. The librarian—an old man in a cardigan that had known too many winters—looked up from a ledger of late fees.

His eyes fell on the books.

They stayed there.

“Those are… not often borrowed,” the librarian said.

Greg nodded. “And that’s the danger, isn’t it?”

The librarian blinked. “The danger?”

Greg placed the books on the desk with deliberate care. As if planting seeds.

“If no one reads them,” he said, “how can we understand them?”

The librarian hesitated. “Some ideas are not meant to be understood. Only condemned.”

Greg smiled faintly. “But how can one condemn without comprehension? Isn’t that just prejudice under another name?”

A pause.

Then: “Those texts have led to… suffering. Atrocities.”

Greg nodded again. Slowly. As if agreeing.

“As have many ideas. Marx. Darwin. The Bible. The Constitution. It’s not the ideas that kill. It’s belief. The fervor. The certainty.”

The librarian’s lips tightened. “Are you saying these books are equivalent?”

Greg leaned forward.

“I’m saying perhaps all books are dangerous. Even this library.”

Someone nearby paused mid-step.

A young woman with a tote bag and anxious posture.

She lingered.

Greg’s voice dropped to a purr.

“Think about it. Shelves sorted by author. By genre. By subject. All of it ordered. Labeled. Controlled. They call it knowledge, but it’s just obedience in paper form.”

The librarian exhaled. “What are you trying to do?”

Greg looked him in the eyes.

“Remind people that reading isn’t safe.”

He didn’t borrow the books.

He didn’t need to.

He turned and left them on the counter.

They sat there, silently, their pages closed but loud enough to whisper into the thoughts of everyone who passed.

The young woman lingered a second longer.

Then, without meaning to, she reached out.

Touched the cover of *Mein Kampf*.

Then drew her hand back, as if it had burned her.

But it was too late.

The thought was already in.

Greg stepped into the sunlight.

Behind him, the librarian wiped his glasses with a shaking hand.

And the shelves seemed taller now. Closer together.

Less like knowledge.

More like surveillance.

Greg walked through the city not as a man among men, but as a subtle disintegration given form. He passed under streetlights that had not yet shut off, though the sun was already scraping its elbows across the skyline. The pavement bore the scuff marks of millions who had walked it without

question. He did not disturb them. He did not need to.

His hands remained in his pockets. He whistled.

Not a tune.

A suggestion of a tune. Something that might once have been music, had it not been stripped of rhythm and meaning, leaving behind only an aftertaste. A memory of melody.

Above him, windows opened.

And people began to fall.

Not all at once.

One from an office building. A woman in business attire, arms folded as if in sleep. Then a man from a balcony—still holding a cigarette, his body tumbling through the air with the grace of a discarded thought.

No screams.

No impact sounds.

Only the soft, inevitable punctuation of bodies
meeting pavement.

Greg kept walking.

No one chased him.

No one called for help.

Because there was no crime.

The city had simply remembered something.

Something it had long agreed to forget.

That freedom was a trick. That resistance was a
fable. That choice was a slogan.

Some of those who jumped understood. They had
seen the seams in the world's narrative and could no
longer tolerate the pretense.

Others did not understand at all.

They only felt the pressure. The nausea. The nausea of meaning itself slipping underfoot.

Some jumped because they had to.

Some because they couldn't bear to.

And some, even as they plummeted, believed they were flying.

Greg passed a café.

Inside, a man stared at a newspaper headline and wept—not for the story, but because the letters no longer made sense. They still formed words. But the words did not *mean*.

He passed a child holding a broken toy and saying, over and over, “It was working before. It was working before.”

Greg looked neither left nor right.

He had no joy.

No sorrow.

Only movement.

He paused only once, to admire the shape of a cracked sidewalk.

The way the fissures split, not randomly, but with purpose. As though the stone itself had grown tired of bearing certainty.

Above him, another window opened.

Another body fell.

Greg adjusted his collar.

And walked on.

Greg returned to the house at dusk.

Not because it was his, or because he had ever lived there, but because all things eventually return to

their origin, even if that origin is artificial. The rooms were as he had left them—still, dim, vaguely inhabited by absence. The kitchen light hummed faintly. Dust hung in the air like suspended ash.

She was still there.

The woman.

The one who had spoken his name as if it were a door she could knock on.

She sat in the armchair, hands folded in her lap, eyes glassy but open, pointed not at Greg, nor at the room, but at something far behind both. She had not moved since he left. Her breath came shallow, automatic. She had become furniture. Witness.

Ruin.

Greg did not acknowledge her.

He passed her with the casual indifference of weather passing over stone.

He reached the bedroom.

Unmade bed.

Curtains drawn just enough to allow the dying day
to lean inside.

He removed his shoes. Not ceremoniously. Not
lazily. Just as a habit mimicked one final time.

Then he lay down.

Hands resting on his stomach.

Eyes open.

There was no tension in his limbs.

No anticipation.

The work was finished.

The rot had taken.

He had not burned the world. He had not murdered the masses. He had not raised banners, shouted slogans, or drawn blood with blades.

He had whispered.

And that was enough.

The cities no longer trusted their own maps. Children questioned the alphabet. Workers apologized to their oppressors. Clerks looked at cash registers and wept without knowing why. Librarians lost faith in catalogues. Wombs trembled at thought. Teachers stared at chalkboards as if they were tombstones.

Truth had become metaphor.

Metaphor had become opinion.

And opinion had become ash.

Greg closed his eyes.

He did not dream.

He did not need to.

Dreaming was for those still trapped in the illusion of consequence.

He had become the thing that comes after consequence.

That comes after meaning.

That comes after belief.

Outside, the world ticked forward with the limp rhythm of a watch without hands.

Inside, the woman still sat.

She had not screamed.

She had not cried.

She had simply watched a man become a question and leave behind an answer no one could read.

A silence settled.

Not peace.

Not death.

Just the absence of further need.

Greg slept.

And he would never wake again.

His verminous task was complete.

The puppet show would play on—

—but now the strings had been cut.

And the puppets were moving anyway.

*One morning, Greg wakes up human.
Entirely, visibly, functionally human.
And that is the beginning of the end.*

He remembers nothing. Not his life, not his wife, not even the meaning of the name she uses—*Greg*. Yet he moves with precision, speaks with eerie calm, and walks through the world like a shadow that forgot how to cast doubt and learned instead to become it.

He does not kill.
He does not scream.
He simply suggests.

And with every suggestion, the world begins to shift—imperceptibly at first, then catastrophically. A wife doubts her memory. A clerk questions the reality of customers. A child fears the alphabet. A librarian begins to see truth as a kind of mold. And above it all, Greg walks on, erasing meaning one word at a time.

This is not the story of a man who became something monstrous.

This is the story of something monstrous that learned to look like a man.

This is fine is a haunting literary descent into the unraveling of certainty, the corrosion of trust, and the gentle, irreversible collapse of meaning itself. Kafka would have recognized the smell.